

'69 Report to Nixon Was Split on War Tone Pessimistic

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President Nixon received "profoundly different" judgments from key government agencies at the start of his administration about the state of the war in Vietnam, the consequences of a Communist takeover, and the actions he was urged to take.

This is disclosed in the summary of a government survey ordered by the President on Jan. 21, 1969, the day after his inauguration. The study was National Security Study Memorandum No. 1, assembled by the National Security Council staff headed by presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger.

Many of the conclusions and recommendations in it have been altered or overtaken by events in the intervening three years of U.S. troop withdrawals from South Vietnam and international shifts of position by China and the Soviet Union in their relationships with the United States. But some of the findings shed light on new actions now unfolding, such as the current Communist offensive and the renewed U.S. bombing of North Vietnam's heartland.

One of the most striking disclosures in the study is the evidence it contains of great splits inside the federal bureaucracy between optimists and pessimists in assessing what had happened in Vietnam up to early 1969 when the survey was completed. While some of these differences have become public knowledge, especially with publication last year of the Pentagon Papers, which carried the war history up to 1968, this study reveals how these differing viewpoints were extended into the Nixon administration.

Two broad schools of assessment emerged among the policy planners. In the first group, more optimistic and "hawkish," were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. military command in Vietnam, the Commander in Chief of Pacific forces, and the American Embassy in Vietnam headed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. Often conflicting with the judgment of those advisers was a second grouping composed of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The first grouping, the summary of the study concludes, "was hopeful in view of current and future prospects in Vietnam," with State, Defense and the

CIA "decidedly more skeptical about the present and pessimistic about the future."

These are some of the major disclosures in the summary:

- "Sound Analysis" of the effectiveness of American B-52 bomber strikes against enemy forces (B-52 strikes are currently being conducted for the first time against the North Vietnam heartland and on a different strategic rationale) was rated "impossible" to achieve. However, "the consensus is that some strikes are very effective, some clearly wasted, and a majority with indeterminate outcome."

- In early 1969, the optimists concluded that on the basis of programs then in existence, it would take "8.3 years" more "to pacify the remaining contested and Vietcong controlled population of South Vietnam. The pessimists estimated it would take "13.4 years" more to achieve that goal.

- In "sharp debate" over the validity of the "domino theory" consequences of a Communist takeover in Vietnam, military strategists generally accepted that rebounding principle, but most civilian experts concluded that while Cambodia and Laos could be endangered fairly quickly, the loss of Vietnam "would not necessarily unhinge the rest of Asia."

- On Soviet and Chinese military aid to North Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs and the U.S. military command in Saigon said that "if all imports by sea were denied and land routes through Laos and Cambodia attracted vigorously," North Vietnam "could not obtain enough war supplies to continue." But CIA and the Office of Defense, "in total disagreement," concluded that "overland routes from China alone" could supply North Vietnam with sustaining war material, "even with an unlimited bombing campaign."

President Nixon's subsequent actions in Vietnam have been more in accord with the pessimists.

in this study, "although his public explanations of his actions have reflected more of what the optimists were claiming in 1969."

In the process, the President cut U.S. forces in South Vietnam from over a half million at the time he took office to about 80,000 today.

While the NSC summary discloses sharp disagreements three years ago on the effectiveness of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, the current battlefield situation in Vietnam is much different from the situation in early 1969 and U.S. airpower is being applied in different ways.

In contrast to the guerrilla attacks or hit-and-run actions by larger units which have dominated the enemy's strategy until now, the current Communist offensive is much more like a conventional battle with tanks, artillery and massed troop concentrations standing and fighting.

Thus, it is reasoned officially, bombing now is more important and potentially more effective because big conventional battles need large quantities of fuel and ammunition to be sustained for more than a few weeks.

The NSC summary outlines sharp differences of opinion in early 1969 over the fighting capabilities of Saigon's forces, the importance of the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville as a major entry point for enemy supplies, and the overall effectiveness of U.S. bombing.

To a surprising extent, the document portrays the Pentagon's civilian hierarchy within the Office of the Secretary of Defense as more cautious and skeptical in all of the major assessments affecting the future course of the fighting than the U.S. Military Command in Saigon or the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The document also seems to make clear that it was reached by the pessimists.